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The Issue of Language in African Literature

(Part II)

European languages to defy colonialism:

Frantz Fanon's famous observation that "to speak means ... above all to assume a culture" refers in general to colonized peoples' attitude toward the colonizers' languages, not specifically to their employment for creative literary expression, but the statement is particularly relevant to the literary enterprise. Christine Souriau elaborates on Fanon's statement, describing language as "a guide to social and political relationships within a community as also between different communities".

Jean Paul Sartre's celebrated "Orphée noir" represented Negritude as a rebuttal to colonialist slanders against the African experience. "When you removed the gag that was keeping these black mouths shut," he asked, "what were you hoping for? That they would sing your praise?". He further contended that the African writer, even though he might write in a European language, was really not interested in any manner of communication with the white world, which he had pointedly obliterated from his consciousness the better to celebrate blackness.

Kofi Awoonor argues that African writers have converted the appropriated European languages into "an internalized weapon of our self-assertion because what we are also doing in the same process is to liberate ourselves from the strangle hold of Western cultural structures". Also along the same lines Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele, calling to mind the multiplicity of languages on the continent, sees English and French as affording Africans "the common language with which to present a nationalistic front against white oppressors".

Soyinka in effect reiterates Awoonor's points in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In a ringing homage he describes his native Yoruba world as "that which I so wholeheartedly embrace, . . . a world that nourishes my being, one which is so self-sufficient, so replete in all aspects of its productivity, so confident in itself and in its destiny that it experiences no fear in reaching out to others and in responding to others." He adds that because that world forms "the prism of our world perception ... our sight need not be and has never been turned permanently inwards. If it were, we could not so easily understand the enemy on our doorstep, nor understand how to obtain the means to disarm it." He goes on to say, "When we borrow an alien language to sculpt and paint in, we ... begin by coopting the entire properties of that language as correspondencies to represent our matrix of thought and expression" (in Gates, "*Rhetoric*" 21).

The dissertation by Chinweizu and his collaborators on this subject in *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* is a notable example. They insist that literatures written

in European languages by non-Europeans are distinct from European national literatures, a proposition that is unlikely to incite opposition. But in order to legitimize African writers' use (or misuse) of non-African languages they devise a revolutionary set of criteria for attributing literatures to cultures. Accordingly they argue that although language embodies and expresses cultural values "it is not a crucial generator of those values and cannot *alone* be relied upon to supply literary criteria". To underscore the limited role they would assign to language in such matters they resort to a musical analogy: "Just because an African or an Afro American plays a piano—a European invention—does not at all mean that the highlife or jazz he produces on it is European music, which therefore should be judged by the same standards as European music". Mphahlele's objection to African languages arises from his conviction that they are simply inadequate, because they lack "a technical terminology and a vocabulary that meets the needs of systematic analytic contemporary thought".

Coping Strategies

African writers in European languages have had to explore alternatives to suggest a cultural ambiance, in other words, to add a cultural flavoring. One of the best-known devices, exemplified in the early novels of Chinua Achebe, is the use of proverbs. Since traditional African discourse tends to rely to a considerable degree on proverbs, the writer creates frequent opportunities to insert them both in his authorial descriptions and in the dialogue of his characters.

Another device is to suggest the lyricism and dignified profundity characteristic of traditional discourses by preferring words with Anglo-Saxon origins to those with Greek or Latin roots. While Achebe also adopted this device, the best examples occur in Ayi Kwei Armah 's *The Healers* and *Two Thousand Seasons* (both 1979). The relative simplicity of Anglo-Saxon words, coupled with the relative brevity of sentences in the dialogue, justifies the description of the language in such works as simple, a description that has been mistaken by some critics for an imputation of artlessness.

Other strategies include the literal translation of African idioms into English—either deliberately, as in the case of Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda* (1964), for example, or innocently, as in the early works of Amos Tutuola. The most famous use of this strategy is the bold experiment Gabriel Okara carried out in *The Voice* (1964), in which he combined Ijo syntax with English lexis.

Opposition to the use of European languages:

Championship of European languages as the proper media for African writing has engendered, as one would expect, some confusion and inconsistency. Ngũgĩ lists Taban lo Liyong among the three lecturers whose activism resulted in the dethronement of English literature as the centerpiece of the literature department at Makerere University. Those lecturers believed that in an African institution African cultures (and African cultural

products) should occupy that position, while those that belong to other parts of the world must position themselves around the periphery according to their relevance.

Similarly, in a BBC program in December 1986 Chinweizu responded to the award of the Nobel Prize to Soyinka by describing the laureate as a "euro assimilationist type of writer as opposed to the frankly nationalist and Africanist kind of writer" (see " Soyinka on BBC"). He referred in particular to Soyinka's famous ridiculing of Negritude in its heyday, a ridiculing that, in Chinweizu's view, "marks the division ... between the assimilationists who do not want to have much to do with African nationalism in cultural matters and the Négritude writers who made that part of their central theme". He added:

> I thought that his works and the Nobel Prize deserve each other and for those of us who hold that the Nobel Prize is an undesirable prize in Africa and who also find most of Wole's works unreadable I thought from that position that his getting the Nobel would be a case of the undesirable honoring the unreadable. That indictment of Soyinka, a writer who prides himself on being an African nationalist, is undoubtedly harsh. Chinweizu's disapproval results from what he perceives as Soyinka's too intimate familiarity with Greco European sensibilities and his incorporation of them in his works—and, of course, from what he regards as the opacity of Soyinka's English.

But while he objects that the difficulty of Soyinka's language, which makes him unreadable to university professors like himself, also renders him undesirable in Africa, he does not similarly object to the use of the English language itself, which makes African writers unreadable or unintelligible to most Africans. Thus, while dismissing Soyinka's Nobel Prize, earned for his English-language writings, he had no qualms about himself accepting the Association of Nigerian Authors Prize for his own English language poetry in 1985.

Several commentators have remarked on the brevity of the colonial period in Africa. John Hargreaves, one among them, observers, "In the long perspective of history, the period when Europeans exercised direct political control over West African peoples was brief: except in a few special areas closely involved in the conduct of oceanic trade, it nowhere exceeded the life-time of an old man". In response to the question of whether these were "years of revolutionary importance," he cites J. F. Ajayi's representation of the colonial period as "just another episode . . . in the continuous flow of African history." Hargreaves continues:

> Osogbo, the town in which I grew up, was a colonial district headquarters—the seat of a district officer—and an important stop on the Lagos— Kano railway. It also had its European quarters and branches of assorted European commercial enterprises. Yet I knew people who lived their entire lives in the town without once coming in direct contact with a European, or ever once seeing a railway train. Such was the colonial experience for most Nigerians, not the sort that results in a sea change. It seems in

> retrospect hardly enough to obliterate permanently such an important cultural resource as language; but that prospect is a distinct possibility if the present attitude of writers and intellectuals toward African languages persists.

Ngũgĩ's announcement in 1986 that henceforth the vehicle for all his writing would be "Gĩ*k*ũ*y*ũ *and Kiswahili all the way*" is a positive development. Before him Sembène had arrived at a similar decision, after an encounter with his people opened his eyes to the hiatus that separated him as a French speaker from them. When in 1979 he showed his French-language films to village audiences, for whom he professed to have made the films, they asked him why, if the films were for them, he had made them not in their language but in his own. "I had not at that moment realized how far I had alienated myself from my people," he commented. "I made a study of our films and then I realized that if I wanted to make films for my people, then it must be in their language." Since the choice of language implied the choice of audience, he vowed that he would thereafter direct himself to his own people and not to the world. If enough canonical literary figures followed suit they might persuade aspiring writers that they have a viable future as users of their own languages.

Thus, while he celebrates Soyinka's capture of the Nobel Prize, Henry Louis Gates also acknowledges that Africans' use of European languages signifies and repeats the economic dominance of Western Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman cultures and their traditions over those of color. The majority of the population, is reflected in the language it uses, permits, or privileges. I have mentioned the allure of prestigious international prizes as one reason African writers steer away from their own languages and toward European ones. With the award of the Nobel Prize for literature for 1988 to Naguib Mahfouz, an Egyptian who writes in Arabic, that particular inducement for adopting "world languages" (meaning European languages) has lost much of its force. Mahfouz caught the attention of the international community without compromising his tongue and culture; someday an African writer might afford enthusiasts for African languages an opportunity to celebrate by earning the prize with works in African languages.

This is an extract from “The Question of Language in African Literatures”by *Oyekan Owomoyela*